Encounters with Jean-Claude Eloy

Dajuin Yao

Chair & Professor, Open Media Department, China Academy of Art

Along the journey of my lifelong search for enlightenment, I have encountered many characters of extraordinary vision and inner realization, and these experiences, in a way, have come to form my own private "Meetings with Remarkable Men," to borrow G. I. Gurdjieff's concept and book title. Most of the figures in my book, however, are more than well-known names who need no further ink spill; but one person who occupies a crucial and special position in my journey deserves more exposure, through sound, as well as words.

I first met Jean-Claude Eloy in 1978 in Taipei at a public lecture. It was a talk he gave at an auditorium where not many people attended and even less knew what he was talking about, or even the genre of music he was working in. In the lecture, he briefly explained his musical concerns and mainly showed us his earlier work "Kamakala" for three choirs and three orchestras. I can still remember clearly: Jean-Claude had long hair, and was wearing a pair of black leather pants, which looked of course cool but still a bit unusual for an academic composer even by the 1970s standards. He spoke English with a very strong French accent (for example, pronouncing "sculpture" as "sculp-Tour"), but I understood every single word he said since we shared the same musical language.

After the lecture, I congratulated him and asked him how he managed to notate with precision the low notes sung by the choirs (a la Tibetan chanting). He laughed and gleefully told me that he simply drew a large downward arrow on the score page with the explanation: "Go as low as you can."

But my fondest memory from that encounter and what really impressed me inside was actually my photographic memory shot of him playing back "Kamakala" on a reel-to-reel tape deck. I was so taken by the sight of him controlling the playback

that I made a quick sketch drawing on the spot on the back of a mainframe computer punch card I had with me. The tape deck was placed vertically on the edge of the raised stage, and Jean-Claude was seated in a chair on the floor below. So, in order to control the tape playback, he had to raise his arm all the way to reach the buttons and knobs. And, his hand stayed up there for the entire duration (20 or 30 minutes) of the playback. It was a tiny detail and yet it testified to such a deep concentration on the sonic world within that I had not seen before. It was a mind-bending of the time-space coordinates, a disappearing of the sense of time, a concept of time that I later found to be crucial to such art.

I should briefly explain that in the 1970s, the cultural and political situation in Taiwan was awkward, hybrid, conflicting, precarious, idealist, vibrant and exciting, all at the same time. It was an isolated environment under martial law and yet it was still quite free in most areas, and information flew in and out with amazing efficiency. I could listen to American Top 40 hosted weekly by Casey Kasem as well as shortwave propaganda broadcasts from the enemy, the People's Republic of China (illegally). I performed experimental free improvisation since high school and read widely about contemporary art. I could study the musics of Xenakis, Schoenberg, Cage, Miles Davis, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Shakti, Stockhausen, Stephan Micus… I even hosted a radio program playing anything from Ravi Shankar to Kenny Wheeler. But, there was a blind spot in my musical understanding. My exposure to and knowledge of *musique concrete*, GRM, and the electroacoustic tradition was almost non-existent. For example, it was not until many years later when I was in California that I finally heard Stockhausen's *Hymnen* and *Telemusik*.

In the following few years, I had two more opportunities to see Jean-Claude at very small talks given at different venues in Taipei. These informal talks were organized by Li Tai-hsiang and Hsu Po-yun, new music composers and key promoters of new music in Taiwan at that time. The last one was in 1981, when I was doing military service in the Ministry of Defense Orchestra, and I grabbed a few good musician/soldiers friends and sneaked out of our military compound that night to see Jean-Claude. It was quite informal, and Jean-Claude played very short segments from "Yo-In" (1980) and "Gaku-no-Michi" on a bad sound system in a tiny control room for an auditorium in a women's college.

I should add that my interest in and connection to Jean-Claude had also been strengthened by a mutual friend, the American composer/percussionist Michael Ranta, who was then living in Taipei, and another important character in my private

"Meetings with Remarkable Men." I had studied with Ranta very briefly earlier and he was literally a guru figure to me at that young age. Although an extraordinarily disciplined musician and free composer totally in sync with Eastern traditions, Ranta impressed me most not with his music, but with his concentration, inwardness and composure – close to "*ding li*" in Chinese, or *dhyana* in Sanskrit. And, Ranta was no other than the solo percussionist for whom Jean-Claude wrote his new piece "Yo-In."

That night in 1981, after Jean-Claude's presentation, I went up and explained my wish to study with him. Jean-Claude said that unfortunately he had left the faculty at University of California, Berkeley, where I had just been admitted into the Ph.D. program in art history. In that pre-Internet era, our paths just crossed like that and then diverged in different ways.

*****

In those years during which large volume and a wide variety of music were flowing through me, I longed deep inside for a music that I could not get hold of, despite my extensive record collection and the wide scope of music that I could lay my ears on. For inspiration on composition, I looked only to "Gaku-no-Michi" since nothing else came close to my own cosmos of music.

But, I had a cassette recording of that night's presentation in 1981 which I captured with my Sony Walkman recorder. That cassette, with only a few minutes from "Gaku-no-Michi," were always at the back of my head but deep in my heart afterwards.

Then, in 1983, I found a second-hand copy of French pressing of "Gaku-no-Michi" (Adès label) in mint condition at the historic Rasputin's record store in Berkeley, where you could find almost anything, if you try hard enough and were persistent enough. It was a thrilling experience for me to listen to the entire piece (even though the double-LP version was a condensed version of the 4-hour work) for the first time and I was immediate taken back to the semi-imaginary sonic world of Eloy I had in my mind.

"Gaku-no-Michi" was so precious to me spiritually (not because of the unbelievable rarity of the LP record) that I instantly made a cassette copy of it, and

listened only through that copy. In fact, I didn't listen very much to even the cassette copy, because the music was too sacred.

Due to the lack of available recordings and public information on Eloy, I could find and knew almost nothing about him or his music. I have always been an exceptional researcher (while in Berkeley, I had been hired as a research assistant by my professor, James Cahill, Central Academy of Fine Arts professor Jin Weinuo, History Department professor David Johnson, and nearly by North Indian music specialist, Professor Bonnie Wade, which did not work out due to my foreign student status), but we need to remind ourselves of what it was like in the era before the Internet – I couldn't even email him. But somehow, the esoteric mystery around Eloy added more power to his music.

Very strangely, during the entire 1980s and the 1990s, it was through a process of reminiscence, *remembering*, thinking back that I gradually resonated deeper and deeper with this music/philosophy, having only three things in my hand: the memories of meeting Jean-Claude three times, one album of "Gaku-no-Michi," and a cassette recording of the last meeting in 1981. It is weird how my thinking back resonates so well with the idea behind the section titled "Kaiso," or *huixiang* in Chinese, in "Gaku-no-Michi." Not only did I not contact Jean-Claude, I did not even talk to anyone about him. Like many things in our lives, it was very private, personal. And this remembering was only half-conscious. It was deepest inside me and appeared as if it had nothing to do with what I was doing in the outside world. Still, I have always considered Jean-Claude Eloy my only mentor in music.

*****

"Gaku-no-Michi" is without doubt the *magnum opus* of Eloy (and unique even in his own oeuvre), and also one of the most powerful and important works in the history of human music. It can be appreciated on many different levels. It stands out from the rest, first of all, because of its unusual grandeur, massiveness, and an unrelenting quest for the ultimate totality – truth, existence, realization. This can be seen in the more apparent attributes of the work: its duration of 4 hours, the title "The Way of Music," and the epigraph quotation from *Zhuang Zi* (the story of Emperor Huangdi playing the music of "Xianchi" from the chapter *Tianyun*) in the composer's booklet documenting the work (*Between Concrete and Abstract: Gaku-no-*

Michi – The Tao of Music, *The Way of Music*, 2010), but, actually what is crucial is: it can also be felt intuitively through sound, and through sound alone.

"Gaku-no-Michi" is deeper than the deepest music. In fact, it is much more than music. To me, it is unquestionably Buddhist, Mahayana Buddhist, even Avatamsaka Buddhist; not in the religious, superstitious, or superficial sense, but in a conceptual, aesthetic, emotional, ontological way. It is more Buddhist than any Buddhist music East or West. It has a depth unseen in any other artist or work. A cavern of sound and a "psycho realm" (*jingjie* in Chinese) of soul not heard even in Xenakis, Bernard Parmegiani, North Indian Khyal, Japanese Shomyo, Tibetan chanting, David Parsons, Stomu Yamashta, Eliane Radigue…

Instead of "The Way of the Music," it can be also understood as "The Music of the Way" ("Michi-no-Gaku" or "Yue Zhi Dao"). All in all, it belongs to what the Chinese aesthetes call the "untrammeled class" (*yi pin*). It cannot be categorized. It is the strongest aesthetic experience I have ever had.

Putting aside all the spiritual and emotional superlatives one can pile onto "Gaku-no-Michi," I must hasten to emphasize the pure sonic pleasure one can get from the work, because the fulfillment is a as spiritual as it is physical. Simply put, the sound is *sexy*, and extremely so. We can think of Xenakis' sound as sexy, but in an austere, conceptual, and Greek tragedy kind of way. Eloy's sound, on the other hand, can be extremely loud if needed, but they can also be extremely sensuous at certain moments, or both at the same time!

There is a visceral, tangible quality to Eloy's sounds. We can get a satisfaction from just the sounds, a pure physical enjoyment. This has got to do the completely analogue circuits used in the NHK Electronic Music Studio, the analogue method of sound construction, and the handcraft nature of the modulation of the "sound objects" — in the tape era, nothing is automated, or programmed. We can even smell the thousands of NHK studio hours put into the making of this tape work. By the way, somehow I personally like the abridged LP version of "Gaku-no-Michi" better than the full 4-hour version, because the edited version is more abstract overall, and also the LP produces a fuller and more powerful sound not perfectly preserved in the digital CD transfer.

"Gaku-no-Michi" is also a magical example of Pierre Schaeffer's concept of "reduced listening." Although most of the original sound sources are concrete sounds

recorded in Japan, they become so unrecognizable after complex processing and modulation, to the point of becoming totally abstract and "electronic." The signifying, referential quality of the original sound sources has been obliterated or even completely transformed (as in the use of the Japanese national anthem towards the end). Many large sections, often the best sections, can be experienced as totally abstract sounds with no outer referential interruptions whatsoever. It is truly a exemplary work showcasing the power as well as pleasure of "reduced listening."

One intriguing example is the female voice repeating the Japanese phrase "*hooetsu seisen*" (法悦清泉 "dharma ecstasy clear spring") in the "Fushiki-e" section, which had echoed like a magical, uncontrollable mantra in my head for years. Not knowing what Kanji characters it represented, I had been hearing that phrase not as a coded language, but as pure sounds with no significance attached, and yet it was heavily laden with sensuality and empathy. To most listeners in the world (even Japanese listeners), this phrase does not work in the realm of "semantic listening" (through linguistic decoding) but actually works in the realm of "reduced listening."

Indeed, the greatness of "Gaku-no-Michi" lies in this power of pure sounds, without relying on the significance of the sound sources (which all obviously refer to symbols in Japanese culture, from Tokyo street life to Zen practices). We often describe the work as a successful "fusion" of the concrete and the abstract, the natural and the electronic. But I think it is a work that goes beyond these pairs of polar extremes. Furthermore, I see it not as a "fusion" or "union" of the East and West, but as a work that "transcends" the simplistic duality of the East and the West.

In the 1990s, I sometimes listened to the cassette tape transfer of the LP version of "Gaku-no-Michi" in my car while driving (this was a time when the work was out-of-print and many cars had no CD player). I remember clearly one afternoon, when the rain was pouring down madly, and I had to drive around Berkeley in my vintage Mazda RX-7. I had the loudest section from "Gaku-no-Michi" blasting at peak volume on the old Japanese Clarion 4-channel car audio system surrounding me. The rain outside and the rotary engine were loud, but they were completely masked by the even louder and more violent processed concrete sounds from Japan inside my moving metallic bubble. Inside, there was an inner life drama, life momentum accelerating and de-accelerating. An alternate reality that ran parallel to or even replaced the reality outside. Yes, this was a sort of high-speed, audio-visual,

schizophrenic “reduced listening,” an out-of-body, spatial-temporally schizophonic/ cinematic trance — extremely dangerous, but utterly unforgettable.

*****

I finally got in touch with Jean-Claude again around 2000, through the help of friends over the Internet. I sent him my own works on CDs and received high praise and affirmation from him, the only person whose judgment I care about.

In 2004, I was invited by the President of Taipei National University of the Arts and Ministry of Culture to curate one of the first new media art festivals in Taiwan, “Sounding Taipei.” I wanted Jean-Claude to be the feature artist of the entire event because I wanted people to have a chance to experience his masterpiece in the best setting possible. The result was a total success: the 4-hour performance of “Gaku-no-Michi” was praised by those who didn’t even like this type of music. What amazed me was again Jean-Claude’s dedication to his work. For the live diffusion, he insisted on using the original 16-track ADAT digital transfers made from the analogue tapes produced a the NHK Studio. On the day of the performance, my production team lost touch with Jean-Claude, only to find him arriving at the venue dragging a luggage case of ADAT tapes and it turned out that he took the MRT by himself and found his way to the venue without any help. His old friend, the composer Li Tai-hsiang showed up at the concert, and it was a touching reunion after two decades. During the performance, Jean-Claude sat at the mixing table with his trademark concentration, never even got up once, nor did he open the bottle of water prepared for him. After the 4-hour performance in total darkness, the audience were touched and were praising the work. A college girl came to me and told me she was so moved by the piece that she cried.

What could this girl possibly be crying about during the concert? Might it be hearing the meaning of existence, of seeing the beauty and drama of life or of the universe itself? How could it have been anything else?

Later in 2004, during a break in my concert tour in Europe, I stayed for over one week at one of Jean-Claude’s apartments in Paris. There, I got to know more about Jean-Claude and the French music circle politics. I also had the opportunity to understand more about “Gaku-no-Michi” and his other works. Jean-Claude showed me a huge pile of neatly kept workbooks documenting the details of his work

everyday at the NHK Electronic Music Studio, with composition sketches, electronic circuit designs, and mixing scores. His attention to and command of the details of the sound construction were appalling. One day, I made an appointment to do an in-depth interview with him, but on that day, he arrived with his Sony DAT recorder and microphone and said he wanted to interview me instead.

While I was in Paris, Jean-Claude graciously arranged a private concert of "Yo-In" for me at the private club of Gerald Lafosse, the lighting designer of the original production of the performance. I felt extremely honored. Jean-Claude knew that I really loved to hear the work since it features Michael Ranta and it had never been released on LP or CD. Jean-Claude told me beforehand that I could bring only one guest, whom I could freely chose. So I brought along Rio Yehlin Lee, a talented and spiritual sound artist from Taipei studying at the IRCAM program. That evening we found out that it was really a private concert, as there were only the two of us, Jean-Claude and Gerald. The evening was wonderful, even though the listening were clouded a bit by over-excitement due to some twenty years of expectation, and too much red wine.

*****

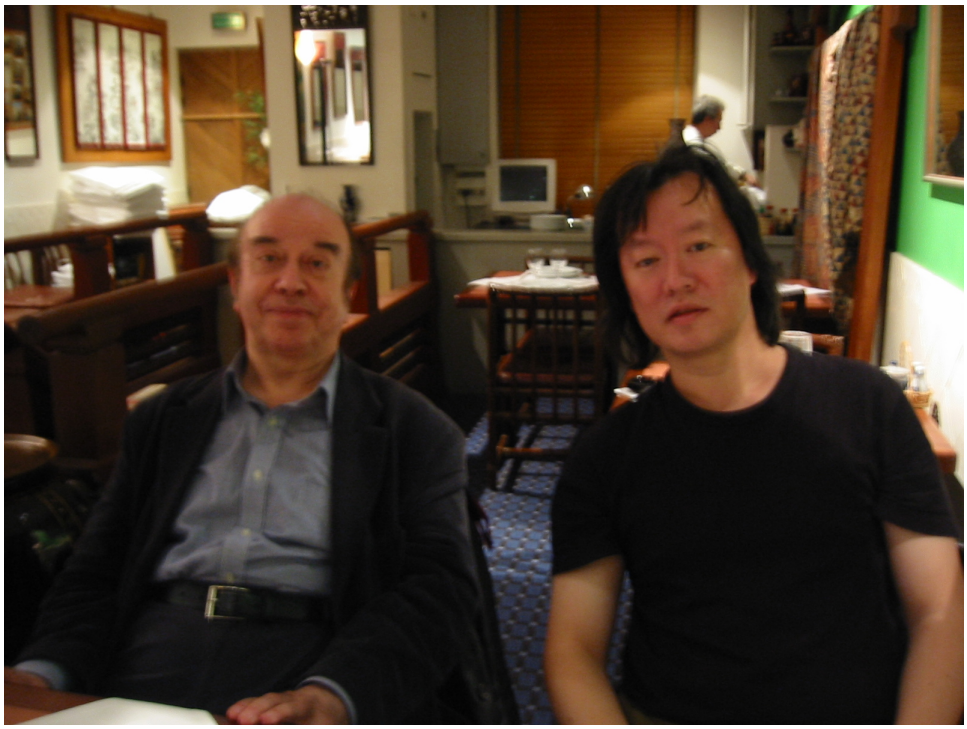
Today, it is amazing to see Jean-Claude still being creative and highly prolific. I am particularly happy to see Jean-Claude finally releasing his complete oeuvre on CD; a few of them long out-of-print on vinyl, most of them never released before, and all of them long overdue. These are among the deepest and most important works in contemporary music and sound art, and they deserve to be passed down forever.

And my encounters with Jean-Claude Eloy, an artist who belongs to no predefined category, will surely continue for years to come, as I prepare to bring him and his works to China — a country with which he has been involved for a long long time, and a land he has never yet physically encountered.

July 16, 2015, in Hangzhou

Jean-Claude Eloy at the mixing board, Sounding Taipei, 2004

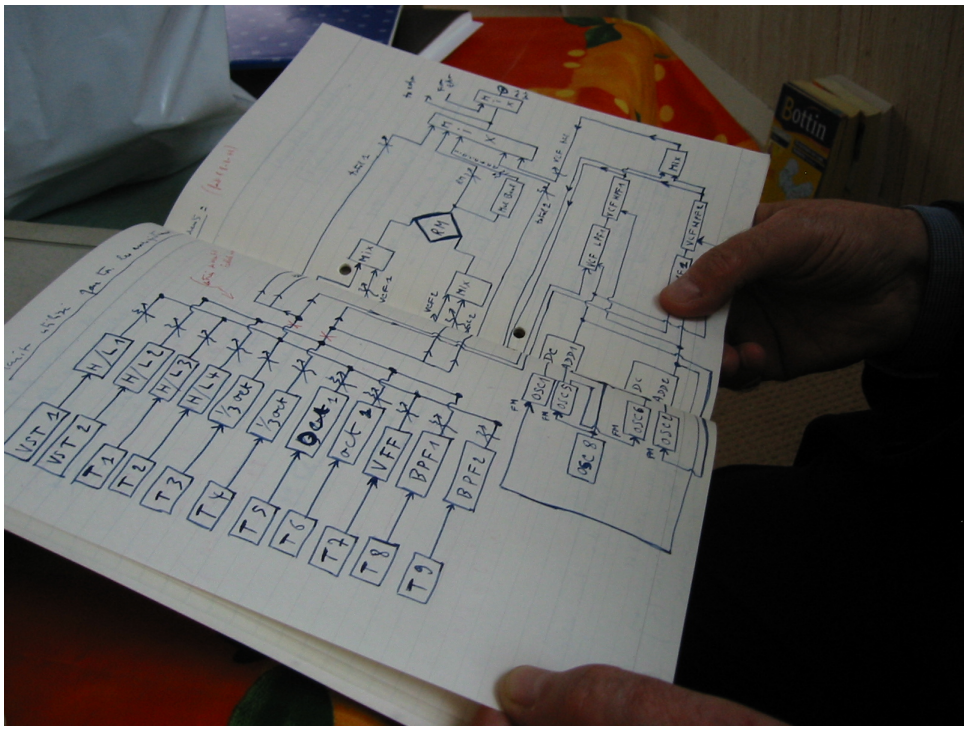
Li Tai-hsiang, Jean-Claude, Dajuin, Sounding Taipei, 2004



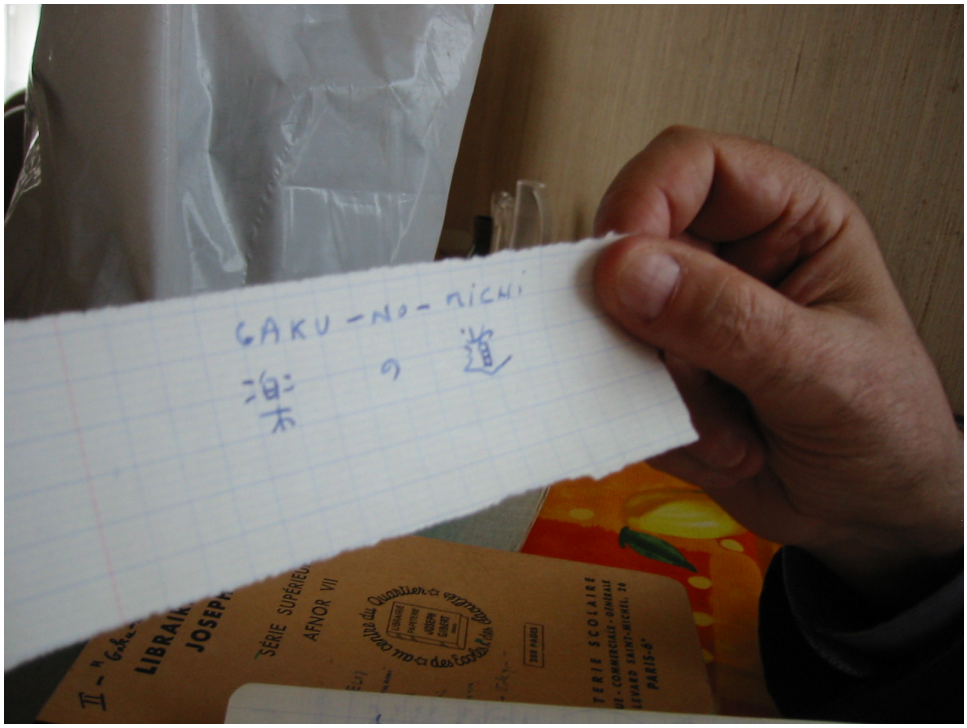
Jean-Claude and Dajuin, Paris, 2004

Jean-Claude interviewing Dajuin, Paris, 2004

Jean-Claude Eloy and orchestral score, Paris, 2004



"Gaku-no-Michi" workbook, Paris, 2004



"Gaku-no-Michi" title in Kanji, written in 1977

Private club of Gerald Lafosse, Paris, 2004

Eloy, Dajuin, Gerald Lafosse, private concert of "Yo-In," Paris, 2004